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Edward Lener
Virginia Technical Institute, lener@vt.edu

Connie Stovall
Virginia Technical Institute, cjstovall@ua.edu

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NEVER LET A SERIALS CRISIS GO TO WASTE: BUILDING SUPPORT FOR LIBRARY COLLECTIONS AT VIRGINIA TECH

Edward Lener (lener@vt.edu) - College Librarian for Science at Virginia Tech

Connie Stovall (cjstova@vt.edu) - College Librarian for Humanities at Virginia Tech

ABSTRACT

Many academic libraries can readily identify with the challenges posed by rising subscription costs. Faced with substantial campus-wide budget cuts in 2008 and 2009, the University Libraries at Virginia Tech avoided the worst-case scenarios, even securing some additional funding in the process. While those responsible for managing the collections cancelled many subscriptions, they also protected core resources and created positive outcomes such as reducing the duplication of formats. The handling of the crisis also bolstered the level of campus support for the library. Included is a description of some of the tools, data, and outreach efforts utilized to identify and to communicate cancellation prospects to the university community. In the decision making process the library also incorporated multiple sources of information including usage data, overlap analysis, faculty input, and in-house data.

INTRODUCTION

You never want a crisis to go to waste. Things that we had postponed for too long, that were long- term, are now immediate and must be dealt with. This crisis provides the opportunity for us to do things that you could not do before. – Rahm Emanuel Wall Street Journal, Nov. 21, 2008

Crises have the potential to provoke fear, anxiety, and even a sense of fatalism. Those who work in library collection management may at times feel powerless in the face of tight budgets and ever-rising costs. Increasingly complex licenses, pricing models and multi-year agreements have vastly changed and complicated the nature of the relationship between vendors, publishers and libraries in recent years. Add to this a global economic crisis and it all begins to appear overwhelming. Collection managers and subject bibliographers alike find themselves asking, "How can we continue to meet the needs of our users as financial resources become increasingly stretched?" Perhaps part of the answer lies in the quoted philosophy of Rahm Emanuel, who viewed the current global economic crisis as an opportunity for change and revitalization (Seib A2). After a succession of serials cancellations over the last several years, the University Libraries at Virginia Tech resolved to approach its most recent serials crisis with a similar attitude by employing new tools and methods to creatively deal with the challenge.

History and Overview

Virginia Tech, more formally known as Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, was established in 1872 with funds resulting from the federal Morrill Land Grant Act. Like many land-grant institutions, its academic strengths have historically centered on agriculture and engineering. While disciplines in the sciences and technology still provide much of its strength and reputation, Virginia Tech now offers a comprehensive curriculum through eight colleges. One of six Ph.D. level institutions in the state, the university provides masters' and doctoral programs in many areas, with some 16.8% of the on-campus student population of over 28,000 enrolled in graduate programs (VPI & SU 5).

The University Libraries support teaching and research at Virginia Tech through their collections and services. The main facility, Newman Library, houses materials covering most disciplines. Specialized on-campus branches exist for both veterinary medicine and art and architecture, along with a small library resource center that serves a satellite campus in Falls Church, Virginia. In total, the University Libraries' collections contain approximately 2.35 million volumes. The library maintains over 22,700 current journal subscriptions, most of them online. In the 2007-2008 statistics compiled by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), among academic libraries Virginia Tech ranked #105 in total library expenditures and #94 in materials expenditures (Kyrillidou n. pag.). When fully staffed, the University Libraries employs 36 librarians. The highly centralized nature of the library system helps keep operating costs low as do the lean staffing levels and flat administrative structure. This allows a larger percentage of the library budget to go towards collections than at many ARL institutions.

The University Libraries have been a member of the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA) since its founding in 1994. VIVA is a consortium of non-profit academic libraries within Virginia whose members include all 39 state-assisted colleges and universities. Among its many functions, VIVA provides shared access to online library resources and improved coordination of collection development activities. With much of its funding provided centrally, materials made available through VIVA supplement local subscriptions and expand the range of resources available at member libraries.

Current Crisis

In February of 2009, faculty, staff and students attended town hall style meetings, and expressed concern as they learned from university administrators of the expected impact of proposed state funding cuts for higher education. At the time, the Commonwealth of Virginia anticipated a budget shortfall of \$2.9 billion, due in large measure to a rapid decline tax revenues brought on by the economic recession. Virginia Tech projected about \$29.9 million in total funding cuts for 2008-10, about a 15% reduction in state support over the biennium. For departments across campus, this meant an anticipated 5% overall budget reduction for spring 2009, in addition to those cuts already imposed in 2008.

Virginia Tech administrators spared the University Libraries from across the board reversions in 2008. Nevertheless, a serials cancellation review was necessary to stay within budget. Cuts in state funding that year also reduced the number of resources that the VIVA consortium could provide centrally, requiring more subscriptions to be picked up locally to maintain access. At the time of the February 2009 announcement of further shortfalls in state funding, the total library budget at Virginia Tech was just over \$14 million, thus a 5% cut would equate to about \$700,000 less for the year. Library administrators determined that the bulk would have to come from the collections because of already lean staffing. Moreover, the inexorable pace of serials inflation, coupled with cost overruns in the preceding year, would necessitate further adjustments to the materials budget. Unless it took prompt action, the University Libraries might experience a total shortfall of \$900,000 or more in a worst-case scenario. Collection managers and subject bibliographers braced themselves for a possible loss of at least 10% of the total materials budget in fiscal year 2009/2010.

Past Approach to Cancellations

Previous serials cancellations were coordinated centrally. Based on the total savings needed, the Director of Collection Management assigned each bibliographer quotas using a fixed percentage of past serials spending by discipline. Bibliographers designated at-risk titles as

either “cancel first” or “cancel if must.” Generally, this approach worked well as most bibliographers could find sufficient savings by including a mix of individual journals and standing orders for book series. However, with the growth in recent years of large package deals, many subscriptions were now off the table, making it increasingly difficult to identify sufficient savings without cutting core titles. Successive rounds of serials reviews also meant that in many cases bibliographers had already targeted marginal titles for cancellation in a previous year.

The fiscal year for Virginia Tech begins in mid-June. The University Libraries conducted previous cancellation reviews for serials over the summer, after finalizing the library budget for the new fiscal year. This allowed just enough time to get revised subscription lists completed before technical services staff began submitting renewals to serials vendors in early September. This timing presented other problems. Because most teaching and research faculty operate on a nine-month contract, they were often difficult to reach during summer months. In addition, since the University budget was already in place by this point, even the threat of significant cuts in subscriptions was unlikely to result in additional funding, at least not in time to address the immediate need.

Most cancellation lists were prepared via spreadsheets. Bibliographers usually shared these files with their respective departments for a particular fund code and sometimes with colleagues in closely related disciplines. However, since the University Libraries did not issue a composite list on the library web site, there was no guarantee that a faculty member would be aware of all titles being considered for cancellation. Titles on the wrong fund code (for example ENGL for English instead of ENGR for Engineering) were at particular risk with this approach. Finally, because no single centralized conduit existed to provide information about prospective cuts, the message about why the library needed to initiate serial cancellations was not always communicated clearly or consistently to faculty.

Current Approach to Cancellations

For the cancellation review carried out in 2009, the philosophy was to keep what worked well before, while trying to improve wherever possible. For example, in terms of timing, planning started much earlier this cycle, which created more time to identify prospects. By completing that portion of the work earlier, collection managers were able to post cancellation nominations in March, while faculty and students were still on campus. Not surprisingly, the response rate to the call for comments was measurably higher than ever before. This timing also made apparent the need for more funds before university budget allocations had been set. Another benefit was that after the call for comments period was over, the extra few months before technical services staff sent renewal information to serials vendors permitted a more thorough check of the cancellations list before everything became final.

As bibliographers reviewed serials, several tools influenced their decision-making process. One carryover from past reviews was the “Big Ugly Database” or BUD. The BUD is an in-house spreadsheet developed several years earlier that includes data intended to support decisions about Virginia Tech’s serials subscriptions (Metz and Cosgriff 324). Over time, the size of the spreadsheet grew. The latest version of the file had over 90,000 rows and included click-through statistics from Serials Solutions, table of contents alerts from Ingenta, reshelving counts, and more. While one could find relevant data on serials in the BUD, its primary utility centered on conducting lookups of individual titles. During the most recent serials review, newly available resources such as COUNTER reports from Scholarly Stats helped provide evidence of broader usage patterns and allowed comparison across vendors. Overlap analysis reports prepared via Serials Solutions also allowed easier comparison of full text collections.

An unexpected aid to bibliographers came from discipline-based teams initially created in 2008 because of changes in reference service. In recent years, the main library had just one reference desk for all subjects, but to provide better service, two desks were created by dividing business, humanities and the social sciences from science and technology disciplines in the summer of 2008. Both teams continued to meet regularly to discuss various reference issues, but, during the serials review, the teams used some of their meetings to discuss cancellations on an interdisciplinary level. These team meetings allowed for investigating large journal packages and databases that cut across subjects. Moreover, without the director of Collection Management present, librarians felt freer to engage in frank discussion about the dilemma and alternative solutions. This group decision-making process eventually saved time as well, with greater cooperation in advance among bibliographers working in related disciplines.

Vigorous outreach efforts were fundamental to managing the crisis effectively. Most importantly, having the review earlier in the academic year allowed for more interaction with faculty. Having a single centralized source of public information about the cancellation review also proved invaluable. In years past, individual bibliographers sent departments their respective lists of proposed titles for cancellation. Again, this situation made coordination of interdisciplinary-based decisions difficult. Just as important, this tactic did not provide a standard communication format whereby each bibliographer could view all faculty comments. During the latest crisis, however, the library webmaster uploaded all proposed title cancellations to a dedicated webpage, and placed a prominent link on the announcements area of the library homepage. The cancellation webpage was password-protected; ensuring that only those affiliated with Virginia Tech could view the data. Such measures safeguarded sensitive information about the titles under consideration.

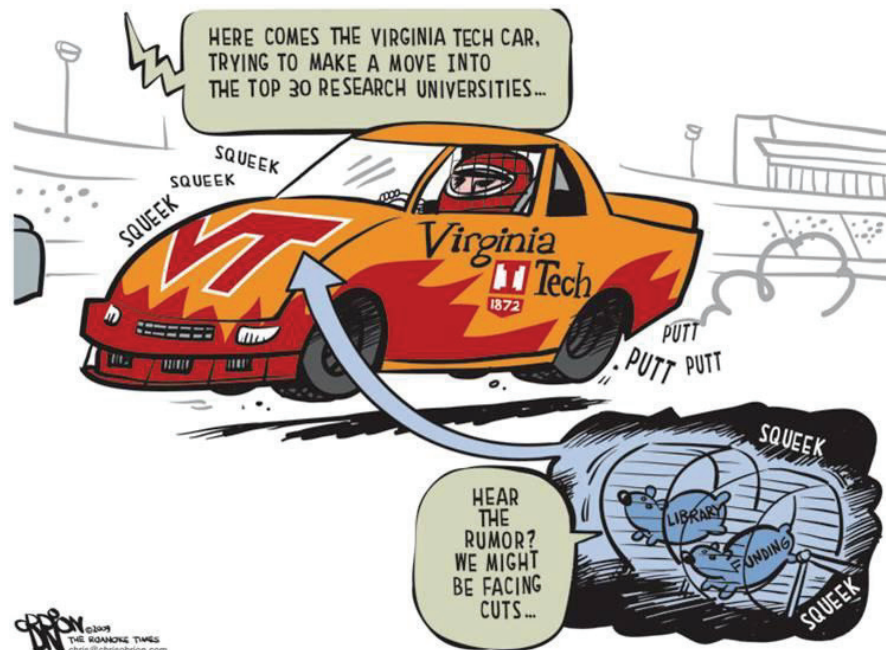
Dealing with Complications

Though the library demonstrated success in its outreach efforts during the crisis, complications cropped up as well. The serials review evoked strong emotions in faculty and students alike. In order to identify enough savings to meet the worst-case scenario, it was necessary to put a substantial number of titles on the list, including some of a prominent nature. As anticipated, these often generated strong feedback from advocates. Another issue sometimes leading to heated responses involved misreading of posted information. For instance, when reviewing the list of proposed cancellations, respondents often did not notice that certain items proposed for cancellation were the print or microfilm versions of subscriptions that also existed electronically. Consequently, bibliographers had to mollify faculty regarding such matters.

Clarifying print versus online subscriptions was usually straightforward but responding to questions about other library expenditures in the midst of a major budget shortfall often posed a bigger outreach challenge. Anyone visiting the main library around this time could readily discern significant changes to the library's physical space. In 2008, for example, following years of planning, the primary entrance to Newman Library was moved and the reference and circulation desks relocated. For 2009, these moves were followed by shifting large amounts of material from the collections and creating an Information Commons area near the new entrance. Still, these improvements and their associated expenses did not provoke as much debate as the announcement of the planned construction of a new "Study Café" in the building. At a time when they faced losing important journal titles, many faculty members considered building the café an unnecessary expenditure. Trying to explain the different sources of the funds in question usually helped but did not always fully satisfy their concerns.

Another challenge rested in sources of public information beyond the control of University Libraries. Some of this proved to be helpful in getting the word out while other communications just muddled the waters. Following the announcement of the cancellations, more than one story and editorial letter appeared in the campus newspaper bemoaning the lack of support for the library. A small group of students also posted fliers around campus demanding to know "What is your choice? Library or gym?" The latter were in response to a planned expansion of recreational athletic facilities for students.

The *Roanoke Times* reached broader audiences when more editorials and a feature story made their way to the region's largest newspaper. One particular editorial cartoon depicted the library attempting to power Virginia Tech's vast research enterprise in spite of facing more cuts, when at the same time the university sought to increase the school's rankings. (Obrion n.pag.)



Chris Obrion, *Roanoke Times*, March 26, 2009, used with permission

College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences Task Force

Well before the latest crisis, faculty in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences (CLAHS) conveyed strong concern for the library's collection, especially in light of Virginia Tech's aspirations to become a Top 30 research institution that would provide a comprehensive education to its students. Some departments were growing, like the English and Foreign Languages Departments, but overall funding for CLAHS departments continued to be based on historical levels. As all disciplines experienced the loss of journal subscriptions, many in CLAHS departments claimed that the University Libraries' serials collections could no longer support the research and teaching needs of their departments. A few opinion pieces expressing dismay over the situation made the largest local newspaper of the area, the *Roanoke Times*. Several faculty members wrote letters to the University Provost about their concern and communicated support for the library. In response, the Provost requested that a taskforce be established to investigate the University Libraries' funding, to review its ranking in ARL statistics, and, finally, to acquire information about sources needed most. The CLAHS Taskforce consisted of at least one faculty member representing each department, and representatives compiled lists of one-

time purchases and subscriptions for corresponding departments, with the Library Dean appropriating new funds to this cause. Most of the resources added to date have been in the form of monographs and select electronic resources paid for in lump sum to minimize recurring costs.

Immediate Outcome

In the end, after receiving an infusion of new funds the University Libraries cancelled some 550 titles in 2009 for an estimated savings of \$207,000. This compared favorably to the original anticipated budget shortfall of \$700,000 or more. Bibliographers protected most core resources but cancelled heavily in selected areas like law, newspapers, and titles duplicated by aggregators. The university administration increased the library's total operational funds by \$300,000 for 2009/2010. There were also no layoffs or early retirements, both important considerations given the already lean staffing levels.

Future Plans

Out of the crisis, the need for continued changes became evident. No one-time fix can adequately address long-term funding concerns for the University Libraries. Virginia Tech is now in the process of updating several key elements of its strategic plan and the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences currently is chairing the group revising the section on the University Libraries. Including clear measurable goals in the strategic plan will help facilitate future progress on this issue. Additionally, collection managers recognized the need for a more effective comparison with other major research libraries. They will be working together with bibliographers to document what types of resources and services offered at peer institutions are unavailable to Virginia Tech faculty and students.

Other plans include using Microsoft Access to create a new serials decision database, which will allow effective means of monitoring serials more closely and conducting cost-benefit analyses. Plans also exist to enhance and update the library "wish list," and, as bibliographers consult this list, they can make prudent decisions about prioritizing purchases when funds become available. Moreover, the Library Development Officer can use the wish list to target potential donors who might be interested in funding some of the items identified there.

Some Final Suggestions

Keeping people informed by employing an open and honest approach in outreach efforts minimizes damage from any cancellation project. Avoiding exaggeration and hyperbole also aids in quieting campus anxiety and often leads to a more constructive discussion about the library's future. Rather than focusing overly on the negative aspects, use the crisis to seek faculty input and participation. Be responsive to questions and incorporate as much of the feedback received as possible into the decision-making process. Doing so assists with building closer relations with faculty, who can serve as invaluable advocates for building and maintaining a strong library.

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